

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

CONTENTS

NOVELETTES

A KILLING IN THE MARKET <i>by Robert Bloch</i>	28
BEWARE: DANGEROUS MAN <i>by C. B. Gilford</i>	110

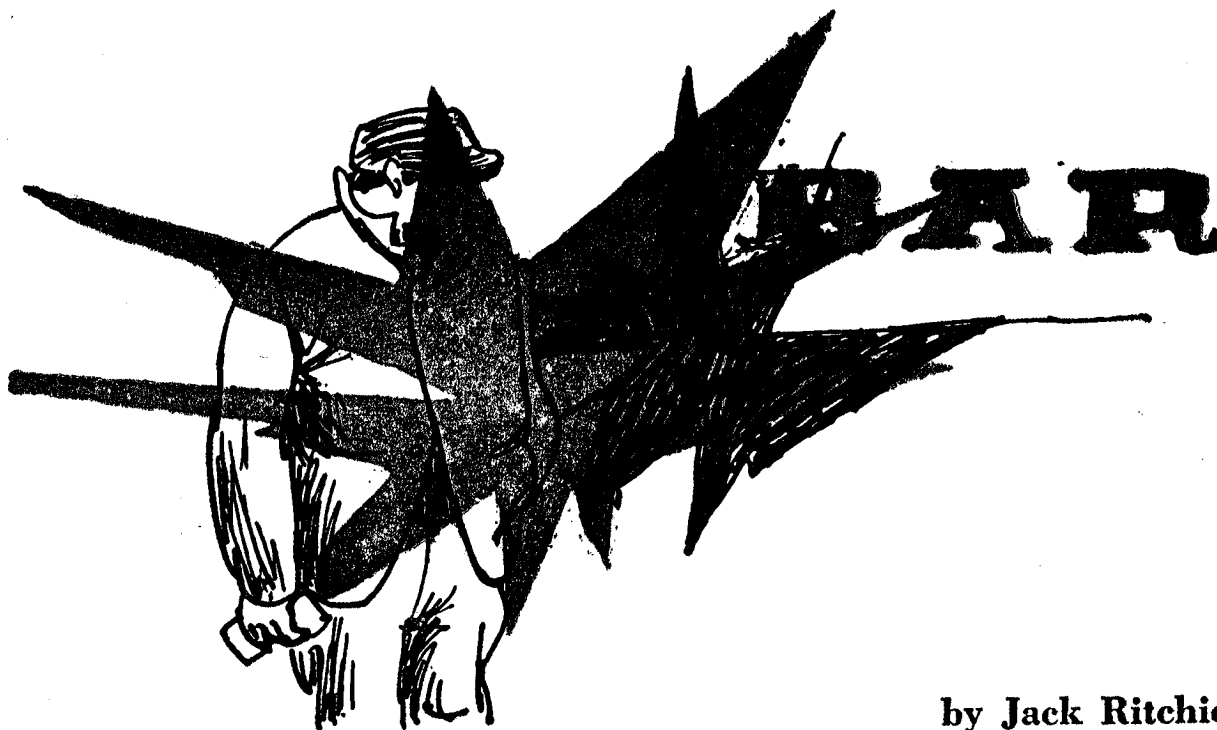
SHORT STORIES

MURDER AND LONELY HEARTS <i>by Helen Nielsen</i>	2
WHAT FRIGHTENED YOU, FRED? <i>by Jack Ritchie</i>	15
TO AVOID A SCANDAL <i>by Talmage Powell</i>	22
A COFFIN FOR MR. CASH <i>by Robert Arthur</i>	47
NOTE TO SURVIVORS <i>by Lionel Davidson</i>	62
THE LAST MRS. BIRCH <i>by Bryce Walton</i>	73
BITE OF REVENGE <i>by James McKimmey, Jr.</i>	82
THE INCOMPLETE CORPSE <i>by Douglas Farr</i>	88
MRS. HERMAN AND MRS. KENMORE <i>by Donald Hong</i>	104

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Should you ever want to land in the pokey, there is no procedure more soul satisfying than heaving a rock through a vast expanse of plate glass. Pitching the rock is exhilarating; the tinkle of glass most pleasant; and, finally, the raucous busyness of police whistles and sirens rivals the best in modern symphonic music.



by Jack Ritchie

What frightened you, Fred?

THE WARDEN shook his head sadly as he looked me over. "You're not real bright, Fred. You were out not even forty-eight hours and now we

got you back with us again. It was hardly worth the trouble filling out your parole papers."

Dr. Cullen sat at one end of the

WHAT FRIGHTENED YOU, FRED?

warden's desk. He took off his heavy shell-rimmed glasses and polished them with a handkerchief. "How old are you, Fred?"

"Fifty-five, sir," I said.

Warden Bragan puffed his cigar. "Just plain stupid."

Dr. Cullen smiled slightly. "Perhaps not, warden." He turned back to me. "Did the big buildings frighten you, Fred? The people, the cars, and the loud noises?"

I wondered whether all psychiatrists wore bow ties and tweed jackets. Perhaps it was their uniform. "We had movies in here every Wednesday night, sir," I said. "I've seen big buildings and cars and people before."

"Ah," Dr. Cullen said. "But that's not the same as actually seeing them in real life. Now is it, Fred?"

"No, sir," I said.

Dr. Cullen put the glasses back on his nose. "You've been in prison off and on for twenty-five years of your life?"

"I guess so, sir," I said. "If that's what the record shows."

Bragan grinned. "Well, anyway I'm glad to have you back, Fred. You're the best typist and file clerk I ever had."

"Thank you, sir," I said. I cleared my throat. "Will I have to put in any time in the laundry first?"

Bragan chewed on his cigar and thought about it. He was a big, heavy man, and he was going to

run for governor. That's what the prison radio announced four days ago. It didn't mean anything to us in here, but I knew that some people outside wouldn't like Bragan to be governor.

He decided to do me a favor. "I should say not," he said. "I need you in the office. As far as I'm concerned, you haven't been gone at all."

Bragan's eyes went over me again. "You'd think that some people would learn to behave on the outside. But I guess nobody can teach you. Not even with a hammer."

Dr. Cullen folded his hands. "In a sense you are right about Fred. But I believe there's more to his case than that." He turned to me. "What was it like outside? Was it cold?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "I believe the temperature was around forty-five or even a little lower."

He smiled patiently. "That's not what I meant, Fred."

It had been gusty with the smell of winter hanging in the air when I walked out the pedestrian section of the big gates.

There wasn't anybody waiting for me in the graveled parking lot. I hadn't really expected anyone to be. I just had the small hope that Tony Wando might have remembered to send a car for old time's sake. He could have been keeping

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track of the time I spent inside the walls.

I made myself a cigarette and waited for the shuttle bus to come along.

The driver was only vaguely interested in me. He'd made pick-ups here before. At the railway station I bought a ticket and boarded the train.

When I got off two hours later, I passed up the taxi stands and walked. I had eighty-six dollars in my pocket, but that represented four years of sweat and I couldn't see spending any part of it for a ride. Not that money.

Big Mike Kowalski was in front of his place watching a delivery man wheel cases of beer into his bar. Mike had put on some weight since I'd seen him last, but he had the build that wasn't troubled by extra pounds.

I stopped next to him. "Hello, Mike."

He nodded and looked down at the suitcase. "You going someplace?"

"I've been, Mike," I said. "Four years."

He remembered. "That's right. Hardly noticed that you were gone."

I smiled. "People don't."

He stifled a yawn. "When did you get out?"

"Just now. A few hours ago as a matter of fact."

He put the cigar back in his mouth. "Let's go inside and get

warmed up. I'll set up a round for old times' sake."

I shook my head. "Can't do that, Mike. I'm on parole."

He shrugged. "Can't see why anybody'd make a fuss about a few beers." His eyes went over me. "Did they get you a job?"

"I'm supposed to report to a warehouse on the north side Monday morning. It's office work, they tell me."

The wind swirled dust in the gutters and Mike shivered slightly behind his big white apron.

I changed the suitcase to my left hand. "I guess I'd better get going before you get pneumonia. I'll try to get a room in my old place. Let people know that I'm out, will you, Mike?"

He grinned. "Who'd want to know?" He asked that because he couldn't think of anybody right then and there.

"You never know, Mike," I said. "I could be important to somebody."

I began walking and after awhile when it began to drizzle, I turned up my coat collar.

I stopped in front of a small cafe and looked at the wall clock. Right about now we'd be filing into the big mess hall. It was Thursday and we'd be having beef stew, bread, and coffee.

I went inside the cafe. There was beef stew on the menu, but it didn't taste just right. Not so filling either, I thought.

WHAT FRIGHTENED YOU, FRED?

"What did you do on the outside, Fred?" Dr. Cullen asked. "During those few hours?"

The warden snorted. "The fool got drunk and busted a tavern window."

"Yes, sir," I said. "That's what I did."

Dr. Cullen smiled. "Why didn't you run away after you did that, Fred? Why did you wait for the police to arrive?"

"I guess I had too much to drink, sir," I said. "I wasn't thinking clear."

Bragan showed large uneven teeth. "You sure weren't. You violated your parole and that's going to cost you another two years."

"Fourteen months, sir," I said, respectfully.

Dr. Cullen consulted the papers on his lap. "You don't have any living relatives, do you?"

"No, sir."

"Did you get any mail while you were in here? Or write to anyone?"

"No, sir."

"Do you have any close friends on the outside? People you could go to?"

"No, sir."

He leaned forward. "But you do have friends here in this prison, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "I think I have a few."

He sat back, satisfied. "You were in trouble here only once. Isn't that right, Fred?"

"I don't remember, sir."

Bragan laughed. "He got caught in a shake-down inspection a couple of years ago. We found a knife in his mattress." He looked at me. "What would you want with a knife, Fred?"

It was the one I was going to use on Ed Reilly, for the way he shoved me around in the yard. But Ed had more enemies than me and somebody else got to him while I was in solitary.

"I don't really remember, sir," I said.

Dr. Cullen made a bridge with the tips of his fingers. "Fred came back here not because he was careless or stupid. He wanted to be back."

Bragan grinned, waiting for more.

"It's quite common, Warden," Dr. Cullen said. "Especially with those men who've spent a large portion of their lives in prison. It's called institutionalization. These men are actually ill-at-ease and even frightened by the outside world."

Bragan didn't go along with that. "Don't give me that malarky. Nobody likes to be told when to get up and when to go to bed. What to wear and when and how to wear it. When to eat, when to work, and when to stop. Isn't that right, Fred?"

I thought he had done a good job of describing the lives of almost anybody. Inside or out. "I'm

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afraid I don't understand, sir," I said.

Dr. Cullen was patient. "Freedom means responsibility. It means decision and worry. That's why so many people actually reject it—without consciously knowing they're rejecting it, of course."

"Yes, sir," I said. "The whole world's a prison."

There was a trace of annoyance in the doctor's voice. "I am referring specifically to this place."

"Yes, sir," I said.

Bragan laughed. "You're up the wrong creek, Doc. Fred can't stand this place any more than I can."

Dr. Cullen became slightly stiff. "I know what I am speaking about. I have had training for my job, Mr. Bragan."

Bragan grinned. "Meaning that I haven't? I'm just a political appointee?"

Dr. Cullen said nothing.

Bragan kept grinning. "I don't need any training. This job is just a stepping stone for me. I've been here five years and I feel like I've been serving time myself."

Dr. Cullen turned to me. "The world outside must be a lonely place for you. Isn't that right, Fred?"

I didn't know exactly why I wanted to go back to my old rooming house. Maybe it was just because it was one of the few places where I was remembered.

WHAT FRIGHTENED YOU, FRED?

Mrs. Carr answered the doorbell. She was a massive woman with suspicion permanent in her watery blue eyes.

"It's me," I said. "Remember? Fred Riordan."

She squinted until recognition came.

"I'd like a room," I said. "My old one, if that's vacant?"

Her voice was cold. "I don't have no rooms left."

I smiled. "That's not what the sign in the window says."

She stood immovable, a silhouette against the dim lights of the hallway.

"I've never made any trouble for you," I said. "I'll pay in advance. Two weeks."

She hesitated.

"I'm on parole," I said. "I have to be good."

She made up her mind. "Fourteen dollars."

I followed her up the balustrated stairway. The railing was damp with furniture oil. "Is Jake Miller still here?"

She stopped in front of my old room. "He died a couple of years ago. Nobody's here now that you'd know."

She opened the door of my room. Inside was the remembered bareness. A brass bedstead, a chest of drawers, a plain wooden chair. There'd probably be a half dozen wire hangers in the closet.

"No smoking in bed," Mrs. Carr said. "And I don't want trouble of

any kind." Her eyes went over me. "You don't look too bad. Older, but well fed and rested."

"People live longer in prisons," I said. "It's the regular hours that do it."

When she was gone, I opened the paper-lined drawers of the chest until I found an ash tray. I sat on the bed and smoked a cigarette. When I was through, I turned off the overhead light. I took off my shoes and lay down on the bed.

After awhile the cold began to seep into my bones. The cold was something I'd forgotten. I'd have to get used to it again.

I pulled the quilt up to my chin.

I listened to the footsteps of the other roomers as they came up the creaking stairs and I heard the closing and opening of doors and the voices of strangers.

After a few hours there was nothing but the occasional hiss of auto tires on the wet streets down below.

There were no hundred men making their individual sleep-sounds. There were no echo-tinged footsteps of the guards walking the tiers.

"People get into habits of living," Dr. Cullen said. "When their routine is disturbed, they become confused. They are lost."

I thought I could use a cigarette, but I knew that the warden

wouldn't let me smoke one here. "Yes, sir," I said. "The bookkeeper looks forward to retirement all his life, but when it comes, he doesn't know what to do with himself. He's unhappy."

Dr. Cullen forced a smile. "I'm afraid you still don't understand, Fred." He rubbed his temples. "What were you sent up here for, Fred?"

It was all there in the papers on his lap. "For armed robbery, sir."

Bragan lolled in his swivel chair. "Fred held up a filling station. He was picked up less than a half hour later. He don't seem to have much luck with his jobs."

Dr. Cullen tamped the record sheets to neat squareness and put them back into the folder. "He doesn't really want luck, warden. He may not even realize it consciously, but this is his home. Here are the only friends he knows. Here it is warm. Here all his decisions are made for him. He has a bed and food and the work isn't too hard. He has absolutely nothing to worry about."

Bragan waited for the door to close behind the doctor and then turned to me. He grinned. "You're back here because you're plain stupid. Isn't that right, Fred?"

Mrs. Carr knocked at my door at noon the next day. "Telephone for you."

I went downstairs to the wall

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phone. It was Tony Wando and he wanted to see me right away, on the double.

Tony's high-ceilinged apartment was on the top floor of the Sheldon building and he could look down at and down on the city he almost owned.

He mixed two drinks and handed one to me. "What's the matter, Fred? You like the big house?"

"No," I said. "I sweat when I even think about it."

He smiled slightly. "Then why did you keep fooling around with the little things, Fred? Filling stations, delicatessens, drug stores. You always got caught."

I sipped my drink. "You paid me good when I worked, Tony, but I got a job from you maybe once every two or three years. I couldn't live on that."

He thought it over and shrugged. "I guess you're right. I don't have much of your kind of business."

He finished his drink and then he told me what he wanted me to do.

I wiped my forehead with a handkerchief. "I don't want it, Tony. Get somebody else."

He shook his head. "This has got to look natural. Like one of the things that just happen when a man has a job like he has. If there's any smell that it's a syndicate killing, we'll be knee-deep in investigations."

He stopped pacing. "You're perfect for the setup, Fred. You'll be near him and you can find the right time. You're good with a knife, Fred, and you can make it look like anyone of a thousand could have done it."

He came closer. "It's got to be done. He's getting independent ideas, Fred. He don't wait until I tell him any more. He talks back. If he ever gets in the state capitol, he'll make his own organization."

Tony's eyes were dark. "I can't have that, Fred. Bragan was nothing when I picked him up, but now he's biting my hand."

He watched me. "I know that it means another fourteen months back there for you, but you'll get a thousand for every month. It's that important to me."

After I left Tony, I went out and got drunk. Then I smashed a tavern window and waited for the cops to pick me up.

I had a job to do inside the walls.

